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SERVICE

USDA'S REPORT TO CONSUMERS

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A PICNIC AND A PICKNIC

Do It Yourself Harvest. Go on a picnic and bring home more food than you took. An increasing number of city dwellers are doing just that by patronizing pick-your-own fruit and vegetable farms. Consumers and farmers are finding that pick-your-own --or U-pick-- or consumer harvesting -- is an amusing and moneymaking way to get the crop from farm to table. One orchardman says his typical patrons "spend the day, have a picnic, and bring home bushels of fruit." The most popular pick-your-own crop is strawberries, followed by blueberries, raspberries, apples, peaches, peas, potatoes, corn, and -- Christmas trees. There are some problems: Consumers find that strawberries grow at back-breaking ground level and that it takes a lot of blueberries to fill a bucket and that corn foliage can itch. Farmers must cope with eager pickers who damage fruit trees and plants as well as themselves when the eager pickers stumble into badger holes. Pick-your-own operations are located mostly in the Northeast and the Lake States. But in other areas of the country a check with the local Cooperative Extension agent probably will turn up a pick-your-own farm for a little fun and profit for all.

KEEP YOUR HOUSE HEALTHY

And You Both Will Be Happy. Curing a sick house, one that has a serious case of decay or insect damage, can be a big job. The best solution, of course, is to select a healthy house and keep it that way. But if you are a typical house buyer or owner, you cannot tell if the house is likely to outlive the mortgage without costly repairs. What can you do? One thing is to obtain a copy of a new booklet from USDA called "Finding and Keeping a Healthy House." The 20-page booklet, written by wood and design experts of USDA's Forest Service, provides tips on good design, where to look for signs of decay and insect damage, and some things to do to put your house into good condition and maintain its good health. Color illustrations and line drawings can help you identify various destructive insects and the damage they do and other conditions that can lead to costly repairs--wood decay and water damage. The booklet also provides a checklist to help a buyer--as well as an owner--make a thorough inspection of a house. Copies are available on request from the Southern Forest Experiment Station, 701 Loyola Avenue, New Orleans, Louisiana 70113.



NEW PLANTS INTRODUCED

Meet The Exotic Pink Lady And Friends. Those USDA plant explorers keep busy. Some results of their worldwide search for new plants have been announced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Five new plant varieties from Argentina, China, Taiwan, Manchuria -- and Tennessee -- were recently released by USDA's Soil Conservation Service and Agricultural Research Service to commercial nurseries for propagation. All five promise to be beneficial to humans and other wildlife: One is an ornamental, three bear edible fruits, and two are suitable for conservation and wildlife habitat plantings. None of the plants is on the market yet, but most are expected to be available commercially in two or three years. The plants that may be in your future are:

Pink Lady is a large deciduous shrub brought from China in 1924. It is useful for windbreaks, wildlife habitats, highway beautification, and noise barriers. It is winter hardy as far north as southern Wyoming and is adaptable to Plains areas. The light green leaves turn to pink, red, yellow, or brown in autumn and its brilliant reddish-pink fruit stays on well into winter, providing food for birds.

Incense, a passiflora, is an ornamental and edible-fruited vine adaptable to Florida and other protected areas of the country. It is a hybrid produced from the marriage of a plant found in northern Argentina and the hardy Maypop collected in Tennessee. Large colorful and fragrant flowers on dark green vines and a small egg-shaped fruit that can be used in fruit drinks, jellies, cake fillings, and frostings are the outstanding characteristics.

Midwest Manchurian Crabapple is excellent for windbreaks, screening, beautification, and wildlife and appears to be almost completely disease-free. Grown from seeds collected in the early 1920's in Manchuria, the Midwest has a wide range of adaptability across the northern U. S. Its foliage, which grows low to the ground, is relished by deer and rabbits, and its small fruit provides food year round for birds.

Mih-Tao and Tean-Ma, two new sweet carambolas, edible tropical fruits, are being introduced into the country from Taiwan. Mih-Tao is an upright tree attaining the dimensions of a small orange tree under south Florida conditions. Its large fruit is deep yellow with a mild sweet flavor, and is borne singly or by twos along the branches. Tean-Ma produces a light yellow, mildly sweet fruit that grows in clusters along the branches. The tree has a low spreading growth habit and is definitely dwarfed. Both trees produce three crops per year.

SCHOOL LUNCH IN THE SOUTH SEAS

100 Percent. American Samoa has joined the ranks of "100 percenters" by establishing food service for children in all schools. The 36 schools on the seven islands that comprise American Samoa now have either a school lunch or breakfast program in operation. Some 8,300 students are served lunches and another 7,400 youngsters are served breakfast at school. USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, which administers the School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs, says that more than 90 percent of the meals are served free.

FAT AT A GLANCE

New Tester For Ground Beef. A device that measures the fat content of ground beef accurately and quickly has been invented by scientists of USDA's Agricultural Research Service. The hand-portable instrument is simply placed on top of a package of ground beef and a meter immediately indicates the percentage of fat in the package. Meter readings in tests run with the fat tester agreed with results of standard extraction procedures within a standard error of 1 percent. Although the fat content largely determines the quality of ground beef, butchers have had no easy way to measure it. Too, laws limiting fat content and requiring accurate labeling have made the amount of fat in ground meat a critical factor. Some supermarkets use chemical tests to guide their butchers, but most butchers rely on experience and judgment to pack ground beef with different amounts of fat. The new fat analyzer is designed to give butchers an inexpensive tool that can guarantee consumers ground beef of specific fat content. The first commercial version of the fat tester was recently demonstrated and possibilities are good that the tester can be adapted to measure fat in other ground meats, such as pork, lamb, and chicken.

SPEAKING OF SPELUNKING

Underground With The Forest Service. The Ghost Room, the Helectite Room, and the Titan Room await visitors to the Ozark National Forest in north central Arkansas. These are not tea rooms. They are among the natural wonders in one of the Forest Service's newest attractions, the Blanchard Springs Caverns. The cavern system, which lies more than 200 feet beneath the Forest, was opened to the public in early July and is expected to join Mammoth Cave and Carlsbad Caverns as a major cave attraction. The first recorded entry into the cave was in 1934 and it was first explored extensively in 1955. However, there is evidence that humans inhabited parts of the caverns more than 1,000 years ago. Although six miles of tunnels and rooms have been discovered inside the caverns, the first developed tour--along the Dripstone Trail--is only seven-tenths of a mile. Not all of the interest is among the stalagmites and stalactites, either. The Forest Service has developed some topside fun--a visitors information center, swimming, camping, and picnicking facilities, scenic drives, and a nature trail. While these latter recreation activities are more normally thought of in connection with the National Forests, there are about 500 caves on Forest land with about 134 opened to the public.

AIR POLLUTION AND FOOD

Nutrients Under Stress. Does air pollution affect the nutritional composition of food? It is a well known fact that air pollution may cause physical damage to agricultural crops. Therefore, scientists think it is reasonable to expect that the chemical composition of these plants may change also. Such a possibility will be investigated in a cooperative study by USDA and the University of California. Scientists at the university will grow selected plants under controlled conditions so pollution effects can be measured. Scientists of USDA's Agricultural Research Service will analyze the plant tissues to determine any effects of the pollution on nutrient compositions of food and forage crops. The study will extend over an eight-month period.

MONEY'S WORTH IN FOODS

It's Worth The Money. Consumers concerned with spending their food money wisely will be interested in knowing that "Your Money's Worth In Foods" has recently been revised. The popular USDA publication, written by consumer and food economics specialists of USDA's Agricultural Research Service, brings together information on food needs, where and when to shop, planning nutritious meals, and shopping for various foods. Copies of "Your Money's Worth In Foods" (G-183) can be purchased for 35 cents each from Consumer Product Information, Pueblo, Colo., 81009.

SO, YOU ARE BUYING A SEWING MACHINE

Is It All That It Seems? The purchase of a new sewing machine for home use is a long time investment. Today, there are many choices of machines in a wide range of prices. "Buying A New Sewing Machine," a new publication from the Extension Service, can help prospective buyers select the best machine for present and future sewing needs. The 11-page booklet describes the four main categories of sewing machines--from straight stitch to most versatile zigzag--and explains some of the features and advantages of each. Different models, such as cabinet and portable styles, open arm machines, and machines designed for disabled persons, are briefly discussed. To help the buyer avoid zigging when she should have zagged, the booklet lists some questions to check out when testing sewing machines in the store. Simple illustrations and a section on service agreements and guarantees add to the basic buying information. Copies of "Buying A New Sewing Machine" (PA-1044) may be purchased for 25 cents each from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402 or for 15 cents each from GPO bookstores.

NEW LABELS FOR DONATED FOOD PACKAGES

Lots Of Information In Color And Spanish. Vivid colors, bold type, simple illustrations, and information in both Spanish and English now appear on packages of USDA donated foods. The reason for the new labels is to make them more useful and informative for homemakers as they select the foods from storage shelves. To help persons whose reading skills are limited, the labels have bold type and illustrations of the package contents or dishes which can be prepared from the contents--in colors corresponding with the actual food inside the package. Suggestions for storing foods to maintain quality, names of the foods, and mixing instructions for products such as instant nonfat dry milk and egg mix are printed in both English and Spanish. Bilingual recipes, food serving and preparation ideas, and nutrition information--in both print and illustrations--are included on the labels to give additional help to users of donated foods. All of this, plus the required information that shows net quantity of contents, ingredients, inspection shield for wholesomeness, and applicable data on enrichment, makes the new labels veritable libraries of food information.

SERVICE is a monthly newsletter of consumer interest. It is designed for those who report to the individual consumer rather than for mass distribution. For information about items in this issue, write: Lillie Vincent, Editor of SERVICE, Office of Communication, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250. Telephone (202) 447-5437.